DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 159 574 CG 012 865

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TITLE Double Consciousness and Psychological Strength in Black Communities.
PUB DATE [77]
NOTE 20p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *African Culture; *Black Culture; *Black History; Black Power; *Ethnicity; Literature Reviews; Psychological Patterns; *Self Concept

ABSTRACT

The development of the unique ethnic identity of Afro-Americans is examined. Historical evidence documents the significance of the dual influences of American and West African culture upon the Afro-American. These influences are interpreted in light of what they have meant from the standpoint of Afro-American identity formation and its implications for black communities in America. (Author/KA)

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Double Consciousness and Psychological Strength in Black Communities

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> "After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American World--a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."
>
> "The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,--this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost." (DuBois, 1903, P. 45).

DuBois provides us with a beautifully descriptive perspective from which to view the development of the Afro-American's unique ethnic identity. Without becoming unproductively mired in debate about the psychological sophistication of his poetic depiction of the structure of the black American personality, one can appreciate the fact that DuBois does illuminate a major theme in the developmental tasks of black Americans individually and collectively. His rich insight remains very relevant to today's America. His observation also implies that the successful resolution of the conflict of influences, the Euro-American and the African, is a measure of the coming

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of age of Afro-American as definition of personal and group maturity. Further, his assertion that blacks have been "gifted with a second-sight in this American World" is a useful and positive way to interpret some of the process in the development of an Afro-American identity. It is, perhaps, an even more positive interpretation than even DuBois himself intended.

Double Consciousness as Afro-American Self-Consciousness

The American culture was an especially young, evolving conception during the period of slavery. It, and the much more established West African culture, were the major foundations of an Afro-American self-consciousness. Of course, West African culture as it was represented in the slave quarters of North America, was fragmented and adulterated by the successively destructive horizontal and longitudinal proceedings of the Atlantic slave trade. However, the historical evidence abundantly documents the significance of the intertwining of these dual influences on the enforced African immigrants and their descendants. The interpretation of what these influences have meant from the standpoint of Afro-American identity formation and its implications for a more positive than usual perspective on black communities in America is the intent of this discussion. It is asserted here that the dual influences, white and black, were the basis of respectively external and internal self concept sources. And, that this dual influence is represented in what DuBois called double consciousness. Double consciousness is viewed as the means of the successful adaptation to a psychologically conflictual reality and as also an important element in the development of a unique Afro-American culture.

Robert W. White's discussion of Erickson's concept of ego-identity seems especially suited to the notion of self-consciousness as it is being employed in this paper.

> "As a concept, ego identity occupies a somewhat curious position. It overlaps self and ego, being especially reminiscent of the self concept, but it is not the same; contained in it is a new emphasis on membership in a social system as a source of one's sense of identity. Better than earlier psychoanalytic formulations, it honors the principle that personality is a partially open system." (White, 1972, P. 411).

All blacks in America have had to function in the social system of the dominant culture which has defined them as individually powerless within it. And, they have simultaneously functioned in a black social system which could contrastingly supply strongly positive reports about individual value. This is not to minimize the complexity of these systems and more will be said about them. But, the summary of what is being argued here about them is that black ego identity has reflected this double membership. This argument therefore also implies that a black social system did develop among black slaves in their various locations in North America.

In it is easy to resist being more precise about what is meant by self-consciousness or ego identity especially since one can use the concepts with the expectation of at least approximate consistency of comprehension but, it is important to spell out how these terms are being used here. A cognitive aspect is implied. One retains a somewhat objective view of oneself. This has a large degree of constancy even though one's surroundings do not. It also implies a value judgement, an attitude towards oneself that might also be called self esteem. In addition, there are very definite cultural differences in the way individuals view themselves. West African and Euro-American conceptions of self are distinct from one another, for example. Wade W. Nobles (1976) does

this latter aspect of black identity definition much better than could be attempted here, and he will be relied upon in a later portion of this discussion to elaborate these differences.

We know that an individual's presentation of him/herself to others is but a sample of how one perceives oneself in any given situation. For black Americans the situations in which they have interacted with whites, have been, in a power sense, lop-sided. The development therefore of a means by which to communicate safely and directly with whites, and truer to one's natural inclinations, has been delayed because the communicative framework has been, by definition, political. This is another complicated notion which deserves a fuller analysis, but is nevertheless important to mention since the issues of black ego identity have been so misunderstood in traditional scholarship.

An interpretation that can be made about what is occuring in black communities in today's relatively quiet times is that Afro-Americans are consolidating the psychological gains of the civil rights and black consciousness movements. One might say that there is a reflective mood among blacks. Unapologetic connections with the African past and the slave period are becoming more smoothly integrated into black ego identities for perhaps the first time on a large scale. At the same time, the reality of blacks' long and turbulently intricate involvement with Americans of european descent is also finding a more appropriate place in these self conceptions. It is to the especial benefit of mental health professionals to be aware of and knowledgeable about this process. Researchers and clinicians cannot plan or practise effectively without an appreciative understanding of what double consciousness has meant for black American survival in the past and for the attainment of a "self-conscious manhood" in the evolving present. This developmental perspective is infinitely more useful in evaluating individuals and their communities than the short-sighted orientation of the

traditional mental health professions which emphasized black psycho-pathology and racistly defined deficiencies. It is, hopefully, not necessary to document again the unproductive nature of the latter emphasis. Szilen and Thomas in Racism and Psychiatry (1972) succinctly accomplish this. Billingsley (1968), Hill (1971), Katz (1976), Barnes (1972), Cedric X. (Clark) (1975), among others, have assaulted the primacy of earlier unenlightened references in the field.

Afro-American as a Unique Sub-Culture

From the beginning of the black presence in North America white racism defined the conditions under which blacks could participate in the society. The image of black people in the minds of the settlers and the successive generations of the controllers of blacks' conditions was not a refined one. Winthrop Jordan (1968) helps us to understand that this image evolved from the vague impressions Englishmen had of blacks from early traders in Africa. These impressions meshed with existing superstitions about blacks as the symbol of evil, lasciviousness and bestiality. Primitive notions of what was heathen were associated with all differently appearing racial groups. And, black people were the epitome of the out-group, with all of the ethnocentric negative attitudes towards them.

The technological configurations and economic circumstances which resulted in the capture and enslavement of Africans underscored these superiority stances. In this psychological and philosophical myopia the African was eventually seen as justifiably enslavable. Economic motives could be rationalized as philanthropy. Brutal treatment of other human beings could be confortably interpreted as necessary to control a racial group lacking in moral attributes. White racism then developed as part of the everyday attitudes of American. Blacks, as less than human, as childlike, as animal-like, as in need of control and

domination became the usual stance of the society. And, this increasingly more entrenched belief necessarily influenced the self-conceptions of those who were the dominated and controlled.

Rhett S. Jones, in his essay on "Structural Isolation and the Genesis of Black Nationalism in North America," (1976), theorizes that the institutionalized segregation of blacks was a uniquely rigid consequence of North American relationships. No intermediate castes of legally recognized racial groups was permitted the status that they achieved in the Carribean and Latin America. It was not possible in North America for blacks to structurally move out of the lowest caste by "lightening" their offspring. There were no sanctioned bridge castes of mulattos, quadroons, octaroons, etc. which in these other geographic areas achieved socially esculative potential. In North America you were either white or red or black and your designated color determined your status, descending in that order. Jones induces that natural communication between black and whites was therefore not possible. The institutionalized divisions between the races only exaggerated their differences and distorted their perceptions of one another.

White racism, since it forces all African descendent people into a monolithic group, paradoxically stimulated the development of black communities. In essence the racial situation in North America created a much more inflexible psychological separation of whites and blacks than were the actual physical separations in many cases. Blacks found themselves in a reality which demanded that they perfect their sensitivity to the behavior and life styles of whites, while they defined their own connections to one another by whatever commonalities they found amongst themselves for survival and support. The dominant elements of their adaptation were therefore their common reactions to their

masters and the conditions of their servitude plus their shared racial ancestry. This very intricate interplay of influences on black ego identity is historically profound and psychologically complex. Some admittedly modest deliberations about the dimensions of this issue are nevertheless interesting to consider.

If Europeans and Euro-Americans perceived African peoples to be heathen, bestial and childlike, this was not the view Africans and their descendants have had of themselves. Almost any account of a black slave's and almost any autobiography of blacks since slavery exhibits the rich humanity of black people.* Many scholars have analyzed records of slaves and ex-slaves, and they document this very obvious fact. (For example see: Botkin (1955), Nichols (1963), and Blassingame (1972).) West Africa, where the majority of American slaves originated, had an ordered, long-existant, productive and effective culture. How much of this could survive in North American slavery is the subject of much debate among students of the subject. More recently some black psychologists have examined the issue of African survivals from a philosophical and psychological standpoint. Wade W. Nobles (1972) for instance, convincingly points to the interesting observation that the West African individual was the member of a tribe within which he or she had a prescribed role determined by the history of that tribe. He or she was inherently a part of the natural elements on which he or she depended and he or she was actively related to those tribal members who once lived and those who were yet to be born. The West African world view also included different from Euro-American notions of time, death, natural elements and spirituality. Nobles argues that because the enslavement process was so destructive to the especially important West African perspective of tribal identity, a new concept of the tribe developed in North America. His thesis of the survival of the tribe builds on the

*See appendix for a chronologically ordered selection of black writers' comments about themselves as black individuals in black communities within the white society.

idea that a strong, not readily destroyed, propensity towards viewing oneself as a member of a tribe did persist in North America. Since the slavetraders cared or knew very little about tribal affiliations, they treated their captives monolithically. In the slave context the we/they group perceptions on both sides translated into black and white. For blacks then, the "tribe" was those other blacks with whom they shared enslavement. The meaning of the tribe for African descendant people is therefore deep, almost in an archetypical sense, according to this reasoning.

Blassingame (1972), from a historical perspective, also emphasizes the importance of black life in the slave quarters as a personality shaping influence. He asserts

> "The social organization of the quarters was the slave's primary environment which gave him his ethical rules and fostered cooperation, mutual assistance and black solidarity." (P. 41)

In a recent paper by Mary F. Berry and John Blassingame called, "Africa, Slavery, and the Roots of Contemporary Black Culture" it is further argued that a distinct subculture has indeed developed among black Americans.

> "The Americas became an outpost of West African culture between the sixteenth and the middle of the nineteenth century. Traces of that culture are still found in the United States in music, folk tales, proverbs, dress, dance, medicine, language, food, architecture, art and religion." (1977, P. 501)

Although emphasis is in a less congratulatory direction, E. Franklin Frazier in his Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States (1957) informs us that an aspect of a recognizable black subculture was that it was emulative of the white society.

> "After Emancipation, some of the social distinctions which had grown up among slaves continued to function. Negroes who were free before the Emancipation Proclamation or who could boast of a distinguished family background set themselves apart from the masses of freedmen and constituted a distinct upper social class. Many of them boasted of their 'blood', which generally referred to their white

ancestry." (P. 196).

All of these ideas mesh with that of structural isolation and its consequences, mentioned earlier. Afro-American communities were created and reflected, in structure and character, both the influences of the dominant society and their African backgrounds.

Survival, Support and Self-Esteem

Since black Americans have needed to be especially sensitive to whites' reactions towards them, they have often adapted their behavior in the presence of whites to meet their expectations of them. This kind of role behavior was an outgrowth of classic survival strategy. The earliest imported Africans no doubt perceived of survival in its very basic terms; one had to stay alive and one had to minimize pain. The same necessities, more subtle in the later established structure of slave life, translated into making sure, if possible, that one did not put oneself into a position with whites which could cause them to harm you. There were many kinds of roles developed to these purposes. (Blassingame, 1972 tells us that the so-called Sambo role was a romanticized literary conception of whites which was not even a realistic representation of the slaveholders' daily perceptions of their slaves.) But, there were undoubtedly many kinds of roles which were reactive to white domination, and the question of how much they were internalized into black views of themselves is difficult to answer definitively. It must be recognized, though, that such behavioral reactions would, at least, be a part of the consequences of the external forces which have influenced black ego identity. It seems logical to conclude that this process of adaptive reaction to whites has been positive in the survival sense, and that it has been at least as equal an influence on black self-conceptions as black community influences have been. This point of view quarrels with those of scholars who have variously asserted

that there were no black "significant others", e.g. Kardiner and Ovesey (1951), Hauser (1971). A black sub-culture was created because of structural isolation engendered by white racism together with the traces of Africanisms brought to North America by African slaves. This sub-culture supplied black models for identification and black sources of positive response, it provided for satisfactions in parenting and in services to one's own community--in a more reliably, more plentiful way than could be obtained merely from white sources of self definition, which as has been stated, were are least inconsistent and essentially negative.

It is very pertinent to this discussion to note that black scholars have taken over the leadership in the development of a black psychology. In this climate, free from the distortions of white racism, the tangled issue of black self-concept is becoming clearer. For example, Edward J. Barnes, in his illuminating paper, "The Black Community as a Source of Positive Self-Concept" (1972) states:

> "Hence, in response to the question posed at the beginning of this paper, we can postulate that it is possible for a black child to have or develop a positive, actualizing self-concept in this society, under certain conditions. These conditions are that the black community containing the child and family be characterized by a sense of peoplehood, group identification, or black consciousness, or pride, and that the family be identified with or experience a sense of belonging to the community. It is postulated that when these conditions prevail, the black community, interposed between the familyand white community, serves as a filter against the harmful inputs from the latter. In social system terms, the black community either rejects such messages as input or in its transformations of them renders them innocuous." (P. 178)

Double consciousness can be viewed positively in black ego identity development because: 1. It has allowed blacks not to view themselves as

singularly negative, and 2. it has been a crucial survival process in the development of black communities which, in turn, have supplied more realistic, truer-to-the-core sources of good self-views. This development has been a gradual process and its progress has been uneven. There were presumably no real communities in the beginning of black life in America. These were created and alternately disrupted by the slave system. As time went on these communities became more stable and a sub-culture began to emerge within them. The collective support stemming from a newly evolved group identity in factual and in psychological terms enhanced the creativity of this sub-culture. The Civil War, Emancipation, Reconstruction, advances in technology and urbanization, the Great Depression and World Wars all effected the stability of black communities as they did other communities in the country. Northern migration and the need for the integration of ever new and challenging conditions have taxed the solidarity of the "new tribe" while it continued to supply fresh culture ingredients to its evolutionary mill. The interaction with the dominant culture continues and the interchange of cultural forms persists.

Some Unresolved Issues

We are nowadays much more sophisticated about black ego identity and black communities. A recent demonstration of the dilemmas still involved, however, are furnished by Barbarin and Crawford (1977) in their study of the perceptions blacks and the aged have of their respective communities. Their findings suggest that blacks' articulation of the worth of their communities, when asked to describe them in a structured sense, differ from their description of the supportive resources available to them informally. This distinction seems to imply the kind of consequences of double consciousness which have been discussed here. The articulation of one's value, even to one's

self, has not been available in concept and in language that is free of white racism. With the consolidation of Afro-American identity accelerated by the more recent black history, the conceptual parameters of a black consciousness will be more satisfactorily delineated. The work previously cited by Nobles is an important contribution in this direction. Barnes, Barbarin, and Crawford, also mentioned earlier, are further examples. Hall, Cross and Freedle (1972) looking at conscious black self attitudes in the contemporary American situation, analyze the process by which blacks, raised in the time before the Civil Rights movement, achieve a mature perspective on themselves within a society which devalues them. The "self-conscious manhood" DuBois hoped for depends on further, vigorous progress with the appreciation for the special qualities that are inherent in what is becoming a refined definition of Afro-American.

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Appendix

The following quotations from black writers about their self-perceptions as black individuals within black communities help illustrate the ideas discussed in this paper.

1789 Gustavus Vassa

"I have already acquainted the reader with the time and place of my birth. My father, besides many slaves, had a numerous family, of which seven lived to grow up, including myself and a sister, who was the only daughter. As I was the youngest of the sons, I became, of course, the greatest favorite with my mother and was always with her; and she used to take particular pains to form my mind. I was trained from my earliest years in the art of war. My daily exercise was shooting and throwing javelins, and my mother adorned me with emblems, after the manner of our greatest warriors. In this way I grew up till I was turned the age of eleven, when an end was put to my happiness in the following manner...."

"A little time after, amongst the poor chained men, I found some of my own nation, which in a small degree gave ease to my mind. I inquired of these what was to be done with us. They gave me to understand we were to be carried to these white people's country to work for them."

"I then was a little revived and thought: if it were no worse than working, my situation was not so desperate. Still I feared I should be put to death: the white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner, for I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty, and this not only shown towards us blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves."

1845 Frederick Douglass

"The reader had already been informed of the handicrafts carried on here by the slaves. 'Uncle' Toney was the blacksmith, 'Uncle' Harry the cartwright, and 'Uncle' Abel was the shoemaker, and these had assistants in their several departments. These mechanics were called 'Uncles' by all the younger slaves, not because they really sustained that relationship to any, but, according to plantation etiquette, as a mark of respect, due from the younger to the older slaves. Strange and even ridiculous as it may seem, among a people so uncultivated and with so many stern trials to look in the face, there is not to be found among any people a more rigid enforcement of the laws of respect to elders than is maintained among them. I set this down as partly consititutional with the colored race and partly conventional. There is no better material in the world for making a gentleman than is furnished in the African."

1845 Lunsford Lane

"My friends were not numerous, but in proportion as they were few they were dear; and the thought that I might be separated from them forever was like that of having the heart torn from its socket..."

1861 Harriet Jacobs

"I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away. My father was a carpenter and considered so intelligent and skillful in his trade that, when buildings out of the common lane were to be erected, he was sent for from long distances to be head workman. On condition of paying his mistress two hundred dollars a year and supporting himself, he was allowed to work at his trade and manage his own affairs. His strongest wish was to purchase his children; but, though he several times offered his hard earnings for that purpose, he never succeeded. In complexion my parents were a light shade of brownish yellow and were termed mulattoes. They lived together in a comfortable home, and, though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safekeeping and liable to be demanded of them at any moment."

1903 W. E. B. DuBois

"Suppose now we change the name. Suppose we arose tomorrow morning and lo! instead of being 'Negroes', all the world called us 'Cheiropolidi! -- do you really think this would make a vast and momentous difference to you and to me? Would the Negro problem be suddenly and eternally settled? Would you be less ashamed of being descended from a black man, or would your schoolmates feel any less superior to you? The feeling of inferiority is in you, not in any name. The name merely evokes what is already there. Exorcise the hateful complex and no name can ever make you hang your head."

1937 Richard Wright

"I was angry and I did not answer. I did not object to being called colored, but I knew that there was something my mother was holding back. She was not concealing facts, but feelings, attitudes, convictions which she did not want me to know; and she was angry when I prodded her. All right, I would find out someday. Just wait. All right, I was colored. It was fine. I did not know enough to be afraid or to anticipate in a concrete manner. True, I had heard that colored people were killed and beaten, but so far it all had seemed remote. There was, of course, a vague uneasiness about it all, but I would be able to handle that when I came to it. It would be simple. If anybody tried to kill me, then I would kill them first."

1942 J. Saunders Redding

"As I look back upon it now, I know that my father was driven by more than the necessity to provide a living for his family. Surrounded by whites both at home and at work, he was driven by an intangible something, a merciless, argus-eyed spiritual enemy that stalked his every movement and lurked in every corner. It goaded him every waking hour, but he could not get at it, though he felt it to be embodied in almost every white man he met. Because of this, he moved with defensive caution, calculating the effect of every action and every utterance upon his unseen enemy. Every day he won defensive victories, but every day the final victory seemed more impossible. He was up at dawn, painting the trim repairing the roof, putting out ashes, shoveling snow from the sidewalk. In fifteen years he was never late for his work, and only once did he allow an illness to keep him home. His endurance was a thing of spirit."

1966 Bill Russell

"It was as much a lesson as any which was taught to us in the fourth grade at the Cole School."

"It stood out, harsh and unyielding, a wall which understanding cannot penetrate."

"You are a Negro. You are less."

"It covered every area. A living, smarting, hurting, swelling, greasy substance which covered you. A morass to fight from."

1971 Gilbert Moore

"These Black Panthers were saying it loud everywhere they went--in the courthouses, outside the courthouses, in the prisons, at Yale, on Channel 2: We just don't care any more; we mean to say we don't give a good goddamn any more. Nobody gets out of this life alive anyway, so FUCK YOU AMERICA. You can beat us to death with your bullets and your dollars, but fuck you anyway."

"God, but it was sweet to hear black men standing up like that. It didn't pay the rent and feed the babies, but God it was sweet to hear it."

"And as for me, I am awake now, but to what end? To drag my blackness on upward to higher fallacies? When, where can I rest my woolly head and be peaceful with it? Which grave shall I choose? I am Jamaican, but not really; English, but not really; American, but not hardly; African, but not lately. I stand therefore alert in limbo--part me, part Panther, part nothing."

1972 James P, Comer

"Such information from relatives and friends later helped me challenge the textbook account of the experience of black folks. I knew that many of them shared goods and services and helped each other when politicians and social scientists were saying that was not the case. At times of church conventions we would sleep on the floor and visitors from out of town would use our beds. Giving one's last dollar to an uncle or a friend rather than putting it in the bank puzzled the social scientist, but made sense when one knew that friends would help in an emergency and the bank would not. I also learned that a lot of the happy, faithful servants were not so happy or faithful but were doing what they had to do to hold on and survive."